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ABSTRACT

The health education profession involves content areas which provide a plethora of opportunities for discussing ethics and ethical reasoning. This presentation advocates ethics instruction as an important component of professional preparation programs for health educators. The main goal of ethics instruction is to assist students in developing higher order thinking skills. This paper recommends that any discussion of ethics instruction begin with an explanation of ethical principles such as autonomy, beneficence, justice, nonmaleficence, fidelity, and professional accountability. Focus can then turn towards the following steps involved in making ethical decisions: analyzing, weighing, justifying, choosing, and evaluating. A variety of successful teaching strategies that can be employed when implementing ethics instruction are described and include: case studies, case studies and cooperative learning, interviews, timed/focused writings, and simulations. (Contains 11 suggested resources.) (LL)

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INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING ETHICS INSTRUCTION IN HEALTH EDUCATION COURSES

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Ethics instruction is an important component of professional preparation programs for health educators. A main goal of ethics instruction is to assist students in developing higher order thinking skills (HOTS). A variety of teaching strategies can be employed to achieve this goal. Additionally, the health education profession involves content areas which provide a plethora of opportunities for discussing ethics and ethical reasoning.
We recommend that any discussion of ethics instruction begin with an explanation of ethical principles and steps in ethical decision making. For example, consider the following descriptions for select ethical principles:

AUTONOMY: Self-regulation

BENEFICENCE: Helping others

JUSTICE: Equal and Fair treatment of all

NONMALEFICENCE: Avoiding harm

FIDELITY: Loyalty

PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY Responsibility to self, employer & profession

Once students understand the meaning of ethical principles, the focus can then turn towards making ethical decisions, eg, how do you resolve an ethical dilemma where two principles are in opposition? Effective ethics instruction needs to include a component describing the steps in ethical decision making. Although the steps often are named differently, most models contain the following steps:

ANALYZING: Look at alternatives

WEIGHING: Assess strengths/weaknesses of alternatives

JUSTIFYING: Provide an adequate and compelling reason to each alternative
(Is the alternative based on an ethical principle?)

CHOOSING: Select one or more alternatives (ranking)

EVALUATING: Re-examine your choice and your justification. Are there any unanswered questions?

Select Teaching Strategies/Student Activities:

A variety of teaching strategies can be employed when implementing ethics instruction. Examples of successful strategies are listed below.

CASE STUDIES:

Utilizing case studies as examples of ethical dilemmas, followed by discussion can help students in developing the decision making skills. Case studies can be found in textbooks or developed by the instructor or students.

CASE STUDIES and COOPERATIVE LEARNING:

Once students have developed their own case studies, also ask them to lead other students in a discussion of the case study and the ethical decision making process. For example, other students can help the author determine if all alternatives were identified. Further, peers can evaluate the quality of the writing. For example, was the case study free of trivial details, relevant to health education and included at least two ethical principles in opposition?

INTERVIEWS:

Discussing actual ethical dilemmas can demonstrate the applicability of ethics instruction to health educators. Ask students to interview a health professional of their choice in regard to an actual ethical dilemma experience. This activity is especially beneficial if students are able to interview a cooperating teacher or internship supervisor.

TIMED/FOCUSED WRITINGS:

Ethics instruction will be enhanced when students are encouraged to be reflective thinkers. For example, ask students to spend 20 minutes writing about how they would prioritize the ethical principles listed above--from a personal level as well as a professional level. For example, one student might value autonomy as an individual but place a higher priority on justice when working as a health care administrator. In a similar fashion, priorities among ethical principles may shift as college students become entry level professionals and/or parents. A more focused writing assignment would require students to compare two codes of ethics. How are these codes alike? how do they differ? how are they enforced?

SIMULATIONS:

Simulations and role playing can also provide students with a better understanding of the complexity of ethical decisions. For example, if discussing medical ethics students can each play a role of a specific person (clergy, lawyer, patient advocate, family member, physician) who would be found on a hospital ethics committee. An additional scenario may find students playing the roles of members of Human Subjects or Institutional Review Boards to discuss conducting research on humans.

Possible Resources

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